

# **Information on Recruiting and Interviewing AmeriCorps Applicants with Disabilities and Basic Etiquette Tips**

## **Table of Contents**

- I. Before you Recruit**
- II. Written Service Descriptions**
- III. Interviewing Applicants with Disabilities**
- IV. AMERICORPS PROGRAMS RESPONSIBILITIES IN WORKING WITH AMERICORPS MEMBERS WITH DISABILITIES**
- V. A GUIDE FOR INTERVIEWING**
  - A. Guidelines on Interview Questioning**
  - B. Service Site Accommodation Process**
- VI. Basic Etiquette: People with Disabilities**
- VII. Basic Etiquette: People with Speech Impairments**
- VIII. Basic Etiquette: People with Hearing Impairments**
- IX. Basis Etiquette: People with Visual Impairments**
- X. Basic Etiquette: People with Mobility Impairments**
- XI. Basic Etiquette: People with Psychiatric Disabilities**
- XII. Basic Etiquette: People with Mental Retardation/Cognitive Disabilities**
- XIII. 10 Commandments of Etiquette**

## ***Before you Recruit***

Conducting an accessibility self-evaluation prior to undertaking recruitment efforts is critical. A thorough self-evaluation will create a clear picture of the strengths and weaknesses of the accessibility of an AmeriCorps program. Accessibility should be viewed as an ongoing process. All programs should be aware of barriers, and should have plans in place for continual barrier removal. Moreover, all programs should be able to provide alternative means of providing equal access to services. If a program is fully accessible, and able to provide accommodations when requested, it should make that very clear in recruitment messages.

Consider the following scenario for John Brown, a prospective Member who uses a wheelchair. He is very interested in AmeriCorps, but is concerned that the program site may not be accessible. He is also concerned that if he “rocks the boat” and makes all of his needs known, he will not be accepted as a Member because he will be perceived as a “hassle” and a “trouble-maker”.

### **Scenario One**

John calls AmeriCorps the Beautiful Program. After talking to the program director about the program, and providing his address for an application and brochure, he mentions that he uses a wheelchair. The program director tells him that the program would love to have him, but the service activities are physical, and he is not sure if John would be able to have a good experience. He thinks there are some programs that are designed for people with disabilities.

### **Scenario Two**

John calls AmeriCorps the Lovely Program. After talking to the program director about the program, and providing his address for an application and brochure, he mentions that he uses a wheelchair. The program director tells him that most of the sites are accessible, and they are working with a third site to increase accessibility. He indicates that many of the services are physical. He asks John if he would like to talk about the essential functions of the service position and possibly talk about accommodations. When John says yes, the program director invites him to visit the program and talk about service.

### **Scenario Three**

John call AmeriCorps the Stellar Program. After talking to the program director, and providing his address for an application and a brochure, he mentions that he uses a wheelchair. The program director replies that the service site is accessible and tells John that AmeriCorps the Stellar Program values the contribution of everyone. They begin to discuss the essential functions of the service. It becomes clear to John that he will not be able to attend the weekly team meetings because they begin at 8 A.M. and the paratransit service does not operate that early. The program director tells him that he should continue the application process, and that they will work together to find a solution to that issue.

Access AmeriCorps has prepared an accessibility survey specifically for AmeriCorps programs. If you would like a copy of the survey, to assess your program sites accessibility, contact Maria Vail at the California Commission at (916)327-3733 or e-mail at [mvail@cilts.ca.gov](mailto:mvail@cilts.ca.gov).

## ***Written Service Descriptions***

For a number of reasons, it is highly recommended that service descriptions are written and that the essential functions of that service are delineated. The information in the accessibility self-evaluation describes how to determine which functions are essential and which are marginal. The process of determining what is essential will help you think through the service description, and be able to better discuss the service with applicants with disabilities. More likely than not, this process will also help you in the recruitment and selection process for all Members. The following is a sample of a service description. Again, if you need any assistance formulating service descriptions, please contact Maria at the California Commission at (916) 327-3733 or e-mail at [mvail@cilts.ca.gov](mailto:mvail@cilts.ca.gov).

### **Sample Service Description**

#### **AmeriCorps the Beautiful Program**

AmeriCorps the Beautiful is a public safety program. Members work with seniors who reside in a public housing project that is located in a high crime area.

#### **Essential Duties**

1. Escort seniors to local stores, parks and doctors offices. (Distances range from 50 yards to 1/4/ mile)
2. Assist seniors in completing paper work. Must be able to read, understand forms, and assist seniors in responding appropriately.
3. Identify potential problems and take steps to address them.

#### **Questions for Discussion**

1. What skills are required?
2. What barriers might exist?
3. How can those barriers be addressed?

## *Interviewing Applicants with Disabilities*

This document is intended to give you some basic information when interviewing applicants with disabilities for AmeriCorps positions. During an interview, there is information that cannot be legally solicited from an applicant. The interviewer should also have a service description for each position that outlines the *essential functions* of the Member's position and which outlines the essential skills and/or abilities required for the position. This will enable the interviewer to focus on the capabilities of the applicant in relation to the service position as opposed to focusing on an applicant's disability.

The essential functions of a position are those that are fundamental or critical to the service: they do not include any "marginal" functions. In determining if a service function is essential the following three reasons can be used:

1. The function is essential because the position exists for that reason.
2. The function is essential because there are a limited number of Members or other individuals available among whom the function can be distributed; and/or
3. The function is highly specialized to the extent that Members are selected for their expertise or ability to perform the function.

For example, if AmeriCorps Members are planting trees in an urban setting, it may be a function of the service position to drive a truck. However, it is not necessarily an *essential function* if the Members generally work in small groups and it can be reasonably expected that another Member would be able to drive a truck.

In a similar example, an AmeriCorps project has a position for a Member who can operate surveying equipment is essential and would therefore require the ability to see, then an applicant for the position who was blind would not be qualified for the position. Nor would any other applicant, with or without a disability, who could not operate surveying equipment.

In determining whether a function is essential in the context of the ADA, the following evidence may be used:

1. The judgment of the program staff;
2. The written service description prepared **before** advertising or interviewing for the position;
3. The amount of time spent performing the function;

4. The consequences of not requiring the incumbent to perform the function;
5. The experience of past Members in the position; and
6. The current experience of Members in similar positions.

While any one of these standards can be useful, it is suggested that no one standard is generally sufficient to determine that a function is essential. It is suggested that all six standards be used and that, in general, a function needs to meet at least three or four standards in order to be considered “essential”.

Experience has shown that it is useful to go through a process where each service function is written out, and that each function is examined in terms of its marginality prior to being examined in terms of how essential it is to a specific service position.

It should be noted that there is NO ADA requirement to provide written descriptions that outline essential functions. It is however HIGHLY recommended. Not only does the use of such descriptions allow for clearer communication between the applicant and the program, it also engages AmeriCorps programs in a critical thought process regarding the specific functions of positions. All AmeriCorps programs are required to develop descriptions as part of the application process for funding. The development of these descriptions based on essential functions should become a standard process.

It is appropriate to ask an applicant if he/she can “perform the essential functions of the service position with or without reasonable accommodation.” For example, a position as a community health advocate may require that telephone calls be made. An applicant with a hearing loss applies for the position. She states that she can perform the essential functions of making telephone calls with a volume control for the telephone. Therefore, the applicant can perform the essential functions of the service position with a reasonable accommodation.

If an applicant states that he or she *cannot* perform the essential functions of the service position with or without reasonable accommodations, then they are not qualified for the position. While not required, it is strongly encouraged that the interviewer repeat the question and ensure that the applicant understands the meaning of “with or without reasonable accommodation.”

Reasonable accommodations cover a broad spectrum of possible solutions or activities. Accommodations are limited only by the creativity, cooperation and collaboration of the individuals involved in the process. Many times, the best person to determine the best reasonable accommodation to provide is by conferring with the person with the disability who needs the accommodation. However, if you need more information or assistance in determining reasonable accommodations, please contact Maria Vail at the California Commission for assistance at (916) 327-3733 or e-mail at [mvail@ciltts.ca.gov](mailto:mvail@ciltts.ca.gov).

It is the policy of AmeriCorps that the individual with the disability have a significant role in determining the accommodations that will be provided. Individuals with disabilities are well attuned to their needs. After all, they live with their disabilities. In most instances, once the need for an accommodation is stated, an informal and interactive process can be initiated between the individual and the AmeriCorps program. This process should identify the precise limitations resulting from the disability and potential reasonable accommodations that could overcome those limitations.

Remember, a significant number of accommodations are very inexpensive, or require no financial expenditure. Instead they might require changes in policies or procedures.

## ***AMERICORPS PROGRAMS RESPONSIBILITIES IN WORKING WITH AMERICORPS MEMBERS WITH DISABILITIES***

- Ensuring that applicants and Members with disabilities have an equal opportunity to participate in and benefit from the AmeriCorps program
- Recruiting qualified Members with disabilities
- Informing applicants and Members that they are entitled to reasonable accommodations
- Training supervisory staff in how to proceed if an accommodation is requested
- Providing the same assistance to Members with disabilities in securing a placement as is provided to Members without disabilities
- Ensuring that Members with disabilities be provided equal opportunities in placement interviews and not be subjected to discriminatory questions or treatment
- Providing reasonable accommodations (including sign language interpreters, printed materials in alternative formats, etc.) to applicants and Members during placement interviews, Member education, training and support programs, off-site meetings, and social/recreational/team-building events
- Ensuring equal treatment of Members with disabilities and Members without disabilities
- Providing support and advocacy for Members with disabilities during their placements
- Not charging people with disabilities an extra fee or surcharge for aids that ensure effective communication, or for reasonable accommodation costs

### **A GUIDE FOR INTERVIEWING**

Here are some “dos” and “don’ts”

**During the interview an interviewer:**

1. should use preferred phrasing - “disability instead of handicap”, “uses a wheelchair” instead of “confined to a wheelchair”, “individual with disability” instead of “disabled individual;”
2. should explain completely and accurately the essential functions of the service position, if the individual does not have such information;
3. should focus on questions about the ability of the individual to perform the essential functions of the position;
4. should ask about education, work experience, skills, or licenses that are position-related;
5. should be willing to provide reasonable accommodation during the interview if the individual requests it, as well as at other points during a service relationship; and,
6. may ask all individuals to demonstrate an ability or skill if all individuals being interviewed in connection with the position or opportunity are being asked to demonstrate their ability.

**During an interview the interviewer should not:**

7. ask any questions directly or indirectly related to - the existence, the nature, severity, cause, prognosis, need for leave tied to , or past attendance record because of - disability:
8. make assumptions about limitations; and
9. lessen expectations or standards, but be willing to offer reasonable accommodation so they can be met.

These “dos” and “don’ts” highlight the value and importance of giving individuals with disabilities the same opportunities and treatment that a program extends to individuals without disabilities. Programs have discretion in one important area, however, and may treat individuals with disabilities differently than other individuals in this circumstance - if an individual has a known disability that appears to interfere or prevent



performance of a service-related function, an interviewer may ask the individual to describe or demonstrate how he or she would do this function, even if other interviewees do not have to do so.

## **Guidelines on Interview Questioning**

In an interview an interviewer can ask an individual if s/he would be able to perform the essential functions of the AmeriCorps position. If the person would not be able to perform these functions as currently performed, then the Program may ask how the person would be able to complete the tasks using different means.

**Here are some examples of appropriate questions.**

- 1) This position requires lifting and carrying 15 pound boxes, can you do that? If not, how can you move these boxes from point A to point B?
- 2) This position requires being able to teach children how to read and write, can you do that? If yes or even no, is there anything that can assist you with this task.
- 3) Are you able to travel and report to your placement site by 8:30 am? If not, how can you fulfill this function?

**Here are some examples of inappropriate questions:**

- 1) Do you have a disability or illness that I should know about?  
[Questions about illness or disability can be asked after an offer has been made and if all individuals in the same service position are asked as well.]
- 2) Have you ever filed a workers' compensation claim? [Can be asked after an offer has been made and if all individuals in the same service position are asked as well].
- 3) What diseases have you had? [Questions about illness can be asked after an offer has been made and if all individuals in the same service position are asked as well.]
- 4) Are you taking any prescribed drugs?
- 5) Do you have any defects that prevent you from performing certain kinds of work?
- 6) How many days were you absent from work for illness last year?
- 7) Have you ever had a mental illness?
- 8) Do you have any disabilities or impairments which may affect your performance in the position for which you are applying?
- 9) To do this service you will obviously need accommodations, which ones will you need?

**FINAL NOTE:** During interviews and when doing reference checks a Program should ask service-related questions that will allow a determination of whether the individual can perform the functions of the AmeriCorps position, with or without reasonable accommodation. Generally, during discussions about his or her ability to perform service functions, the individual will raise the issue of reasonable accommodation.

### ***Service Site Accommodation Process***

Under Federal law, any program which receives federal funds is required to comply with the requirements of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). Reasonable accommodations must be made on a case-by-case basis and are not required when costs would constitute an undue hardship for a program.

#### **What are reasonable accommodations?**

Reasonable accommodations are adjustments or modifications which range from making the physical service environment accessible, to restructuring a service position, providing assistive equipment, providing certain types of personal assistants(e.g., a reader for a person who is blind, an interpreter for a person who is deaf), transferring a Member to a different position or location, or providing flexible scheduling. Reasonable accommodations are “tools” provided by programs to enable Members with disabilities to do their service, just as the program provides the means for all Members to accomplish their service.

#### **What is Undue Hardship?**

This legal term is defined in the ADA as an action requiring significant difficulty or expense for the Program, considering the following factors:

- the nature and cost of the proposed accommodation,
- the overall financial resources of the business and the effect of the accommodation upon expenses and resources, and
- the impact of the accommodation upon the operation of the facility.

#### **When May a Service Accommodation be Required?**

A service site accommodation may be requested by a Member with a disability at any time during their term of service. After initiating the service site accommodation process, the individual and the Program should discuss the request. There are several considerations when determining reasonable accommodation requests, including the demands of the service position, the Member’s skills and functional limitations, available technology, and cost. After both parties agree that a workplace accommodation is needed, an appropriate one must be selected.

## **What are the Steps to Consider when Making a Service Site Accommodation?**

Step 1: Decide if the Member with a disability is qualified to perform the essential functions of the AmeriCorps position with or without an accommodation.

Step 2: Identify the Member's workplace accommodation needs by:

- involving the Member who has the disability in every step of the process;
- employing confidentiality principles while exploring ways to provide workplace accommodations;
- consulting with rehabilitation professionals, if needed;
- using service descriptions and service analyses to detail essential functions of the service position; and
- identifying the Member's functional limitations and potential accommodations.

Step 3: Select and provide the accommodation that is most appropriate for the Member and Program.

Remember:

- Costs should not be an undue hardship.
- Accommodations selected should be effective, reliable, easy to use, and readily available for the Member needing the accommodation.
- A Member should try the product or piece of equipment prior to purchase.

Step 4: Check results by:

- monitoring the accommodation to see if the adaptation enables the Member to complete the necessary work task(s); and
- periodically evaluating the accommodation(s) to ensure effectiveness.

Step 5: Provide follow-up, if needed, by:

- modifying the accommodation if necessary; or
- repeating these steps if appropriate.

***Basic Etiquette: People with Disabilities***

- 1) Any and all assistive devices (canes, wheelchairs, crutches, communication boards, etc. should always be respected as personal property. Unless given specific and explicit permission, do not move, play with, or use them.
- 2) Always direct your communication to the individual with a disability. If they are accompanied, do not direct your comments to the companion.
- 3) Do not focus on the disability, but on the individual and the issue at hand.
- 4) If you are uncertain about what to do, ask. Most people would rather answer a question about protocol than be in an uncomfortable situation.
- 5) Don't worry about what to call someone. All people with disabilities have names.
- 6) Remember that people with disabilities are interested in the same topics of conversation as non-disabled people.
- 7) Use a normal speaking tone and style. If someone needs you to speak in a louder voice, he or she will ask you to do so.
- 8) Remember that people with disabilities, like all people, are experts on themselves. They know what they like, what they don't like, and what they can and cannot do.
- 9) People with disabilities in AmeriCorps programs are there because they have a commitment to "Getting Things Done" and national and community service. Ensure that your attitudes do not prevent that.
- 10) As with all other etiquette issues, when mistakes are made, apologize, correct the problem, learn from the mistake and move on.

### ***Basic Etiquette: People with Speech Impairments***

- 1) Do not ignore persons with speech impairments because of your concerns that you will not understand them.
- 2) Do not interrupt a person with speech impairments. Speak only when you are certain that he or she has finished speaking.
- 3) Do not attempt to rush a conversation. Plan for a conversation with a person with impaired speech to take longer.
- 4) Face the individual and maintain eye contact. Give the conversation your full attention.
- 5) If the individual is accompanied by another individual, do not address questions, comments, or concerns to the companion.
- 6) Do not pretend you understand what is being said if you don't.
- 7) Do not assume that a person with a speech impairment is incapable of understanding you.
- 8) Some people with speech impairments have difficulty with inflections. Do not make assumptions based on facial expressions or vocal inflections unless you know the individual very well.

- 9) Do not play with a communication device or try to use someone's communication device. Such communication aids are considered an extension of an individual's "personal space" and should be respected as such.
- 10) If you are having trouble communicating, ask if an individual can use a computer or TDD.

### ***Basic Etiquette: People with Hearing Impairments***

- 1) Always look directly at a person with hearing loss.
- 2) Do not obscure your face and mouth with your hands, facial hair, or other distractions.
- 3) There is a wide range of hearing losses and communication methods. Please ask, if you do not know the individual's preferred communication method.
- 4) To get the attention of a person with a hearing loss, call his or her name. If there is no response, you can lightly touch them on the arm or shoulder.
- 5) Speak clearly and evenly. Do not exaggerate your speech.
- 6) If you are asked to repeat yourself several times, try rephrasing your sentence.
- 7) When providing information that involves a number or an address, consider alternative ways to provide it; writing, faxing, or e-mailing are great ways to ensure accuracy and decrease frustration.
- 8) If you are experiencing extreme difficulty communicating orally, ask if you can write. Never say "Oh, forget it, it is not important." Keep messages simple and direct.
- 9) Be aware of the environment. Large and crowded rooms and hallways can be very difficult for hearing impaired persons. Bright sunlight and shadows also present barriers.
- 10) Do not change the topic of conversation without warning. Use transitional phrases such as "Okay, we need to discuss..."

### ***Basis Etiquette: People with Visual Impairments***

- 1) Offer the use of your arm. Do not clutch the person's arm. Walk as you normally would.
- 2) Do not be offended if your offer to assist a visually impaired person is declined.
- 3) Give a person with visual impairment a brief description of the surroundings. "There is a table in the middle of the room, about size feet in front of you," or "There is a coffee table on the left side of the door as you enter."
- 4) Use descriptive phrases that relate to sound, smell, and distance when guiding a visually impaired person.
- 5) Guide dogs are working animals and should not be treated as pets. Do not give the dog instructions, play with, or touch it.
- 6) Do not grab or try to steer the cane of a person with visual impairments.
- 7) Always determine in what format a person with visual impairments wants information: Braille, large print, or audiotope. Do not assume what format an individual uses or prefers.
- 8) Direct your comments, questions or concerns to the person with a visual impairment, not to his or her companion.
- 9) If you are reading for a person with visual impairment, first describe the information to be read. Use a normal speaking voice. Do not skip information unless requested to do so.
- 10) Always identify yourself by name.

### ***Basic Etiquette: People with Mobility Impairments***

- 1) Remember that a wheelchair is part of an individual's "personal space". Do not lean on it, push it, or rest your feet on it without explicit permission.
- 2) ALWAYS ASK if you can offer assistance before you provide assistance.
- 3) If your offer of assistance is accepted, ask for instructions and follow those that are given to you.
- 4) When given permission to push a wheelchair, push slowly at first. Wheelchairs can pick up momentum quickly.
- 5) Personally check locations of events for accessibility. Use a check list. Alert persons with mobility impairments of potential problems or barriers.
- 6) Don't ask people how they acquired their disability, how they feel about it, or other personal questions unless it is clear that someone may want to discuss it. It is not their job to educate you.
- 7) Don't pat an individual who uses a wheelchair on the back or on the head.
- 8) If possible, sit down so that you are at eye level.

- 9) If architectural barriers will be encountered, alert the individual in advance so that he or she can make decisions and plan ahead.
- 10) Remember, that in general, persons with mobility impairments are not deaf, visually impaired, or cognitively impaired. The only accommodations that you need to make are those that relate to mobility impairment.

### ***Basic Etiquette: People with Psychiatric Disabilities***

- 1) Do not assume that people with psychiatric disabilities necessarily need any extra assistance or different treatment.
- 2) Treat people with psychiatric disabilities as individuals. Don't make assumptions based on experiences you've had with other people with psychiatric disabilities.
- 3) Do not assume that people with psychiatric disabilities are more likely to be violent than people without psychiatric disabilities; this is a myth.
- 4) Do not assume that all people with psychiatric disabilities take medication or should take medication.
- 5) Do not assume that all people with psychiatric disabilities are not capable of signing contracts, giving consent for medical treatment. Many are legally competent.
- 6) Do not assume that people with psychiatric disabilities also have cognitive disabilities or are less intelligent than the general population.
- 7) Do not assume that people with psychiatric disabilities are not capable of working in a wide variety of jobs which require a wide range of skills and abilities.
- 8) Do not assume that people don't know what is best for them, or have poor judgment.
- 9) If someone with a psychiatric disability gets upset, ask calmly if there is anything you can do to help and then respect their wishes.
- 10) Don't assume that a person with a psychiatric disability is unable to cope with stress.

### ***Basic Etiquette: People with Mental Retardation/Cognitive Disabilities***

- 1) Use clear language that is concise and to the point.
- 2) Avoid clichés and idiomatic usage's, unless someone is clearly familiar with the terms.
- 3) Do not "talk down" to a person with mental retardation.
- 4) "Walk through" the steps of a task or project. Let an individual perform each part of the task after you explain it.
- 5) Direct questions, concerns, and conversation to the individual.

- 6) Assume that an adult with mental retardation has had the same experiences as any other adult.
- 7) Use pictures or simple photographs to identify rooms, tasks or directions.
- 8) Treat the individual as you would anyone else. If engaging in a conversation with someone with mental retardation, bring up the same topics of conversation as you would with anyone else such as weekend activities, vacation plans, the weather, or recent events.
- 9) Direct your comments, questions, and concerns regarding a person with mental retardation or a cognitive disability *to* that individual.
- 10) Remember that persons with mental retardation or cognitive disabilities are legally competent. They can sign documents, vote, give consent to medical care, and sign contracts.

### ***10 Commandments of Etiquette***

- 1) When talking with a person with a disability, speak directly to that person rather than through a companion or sign language interpreter who may be present.
- 2) When introduced to a person with a disability, it is appropriate to offer to shake hands. People with limited hand use or who wear an artificial limb can usually shake hands. Shaking hands with the left hand is an acceptable greeting.
- 3) When meeting a person with a visual impairment, always identify yourself and others who may be with you. When conversing in a group, remember to identify the person to whom you are speaking.
- 4) If you offer assistance, wait until the offer is accepted. Then listen to or ask for instructions.
- 5) Treat adults as adults. Address people who have disabilities by their first names only when extending that same familiarity to all others present. Never patronize people who use wheelchairs by patting them on the head or shoulder.
- 6) Leaning or hanging on a person's wheelchair is similar to leaning or hanging on a person and is generally considered annoying. The chair is part of the personal body space of the person who uses it.
- 7) Listen attentively when you're talking with a person who has difficulty speaking. Be patient and wait for the person to finish, rather than correcting or speaking for the person. If necessary, ask short questions that require short answers, a nod, or a shake of the head. Never pretend to understand if you are having difficulty doing so. Instead, repeat what you have understood and allow the person to respond. The response will clue you in and guide your understanding.



- 8) When speaking with a person in a wheelchair or a person who uses crutches, place yourself at eye level in front of the person to facilitate the conversation.
- 9) To get the attention of a person who is hearing-impaired, tap the person on the shoulder or wave your hand. Look directly at the person and speak clearly. Not all people with a hearing-impairment can lip-read. For those who do lip-read, be sensitive to their needs by placing yourself facing the light source and keeping hands, cigarettes and food away from your mouth when speaking
- 10) Relax. Don't be embarrassed if you happen to use accepted, common expressions, such as "See you later" or "Did you hear about this," that seem to relate to the person's disability.